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DEPARTMENT FOR D, P, G, SCA, DRL AND S/IRF FROM AMBASSADOR  
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [MARR](#) [UZ](#)  
SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS AND SUPPORTING  
AFGHANISTAN - IT'S NOT EITHER OR

REF: A. TASHKENT 1113  
[1](#)B. TASHKENT 552  
[1](#)C. TASHKENT 1080  
[1](#)D. USDAO TASHKENT REPORT DTG 300422Z SEP 08  
[1](#)E. ASHGABAT 1254  
[1](#)F. TASHKENT 1123

Classified By: P-E Chief Nicholas Berliner for reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C/NF) Summary: The imperative of establishing new supply routes to support Coalition forces in Afghanistan necessitates continued inter-agency deftness and consensus on our approach to Uzbekistan. We have important equities at stake here, particularly in advancing human rights, religious freedom, combating trafficking in persons, counter-narcotics and non-proliferation. Broadening our security relationship with the Government of Uzbekistan (GOU) to expand commercial supply routes into Afghanistan does not mean that we have to sacrifice or diminish our role as the primary advocate for freedom in Uzbekistan. If we continue to approach these questions in a careful, consistent manner, we can both speak with authority on advancing freedom and cooperate with the GOU to supply our forces in Afghanistan. Conversely, if we do not coordinate these policies, it is probable that we will achieve neither. This cable represents Embassy Tashkent's recommendation to the inter-agency community on policy approaches toward Uzbekistan at this important juncture. The cable may also be viewed as input for the SCA Bureau's contribution to the presidential transition team. End Summary

Context

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[1](#)2. (C/NF) Uzbekistan is a young state grafted onto the vestiges of an ancient civilization that, after seventy years of Soviet rule, has been slow to shed the culture of repression, suspicion and authoritarianism that was its legacy. The Uzbek people, like people the world over, want prosperity, an end to corruption and greater freedom. Unfortunately, the flawed leadership of President Islom Karimov has hindered Uzbekistan's transition to democracy and a market economy. Uzbekistan has avoided the bloody ethnic and sectarian strife that has ravaged some of its neighbors, but it is the specter of instability and extremism that has alternately prompted, and been exploited by, Karimov to stifle democratic development. Modern day Uzbekistan is a contradiction, a society that is much freer than probably at any other time in its history, but one that also is not wholly free. Reformers work on the margins, progress is

incremental and setbacks frequent. Significant change is unlikely until the current septuagenarian leadership of Soviet vintage passes from the scene.

13. (C/NF) Our relations with the Government of Uzbekistan are strained because the U.S. is the strongest advocate for democracy and human rights in this country. The GOU regularly accuses us of double standards and would rather we engage strictly on commercial and limited security terms. Karimov and his national security apparatus still suspect that our democracy agenda is aimed at fomenting a "color revolution" in Uzbekistan. Consequently, the GOU does its best to circumscribe efforts by the U.S. and the international community to create a culture of accountability on freedom and human rights. However, important work is being done here and progress is being made, particularly in the areas of combating trafficking in persons and child labor, and such progress is starting to have spill-over effects in other areas as well.

#### Progress

14. (C/NF) Since reaching their nadir following the events in Andijon in 2005, our bilateral relations with Uzbekistan have begun to improve. We have been able to sustain a dialogue with the GOU across a range of issues, including human rights, religious freedom, trafficking in persons and child labor. We are discussing bringing DEA back to Uzbekistan and have been working to support rule of law projects in the country. Most importantly, our engagement is making a difference that can be felt directly in the lives of ordinary people in this country. Progress here is uneven and

precarious, improvements in one area are often accompanied by reports of regression elsewhere.

15. (C/NF) Nevertheless, several areas stand out where, because of our engagement, the GOU has taken positive steps: anti-trafficking laws have been strengthened and penalties made more severe; a National Action Plan has been adopted on implementing two International Labor Organization anti-child labor conventions, and there continue to be credible reports that many fewer children have been mobilized for the cotton harvest this year; the ICRC has gained access to the majority of prisons (although there is still not full access to NSS pre-trial detention facilities); Uzbekistan passed its first habeas corpus law in 2008 following years of work by the American Bar Association; and the overall number of political prisoners has decreased. On religious freedom, the work of Ambassador Hanford has gotten the GOU to accept the principle of an exchange of letters with the USG that would commit it to an expansion of religious freedom in Uzbekistan. Although elements of this letter are still too vague, its very existence and its binding nature represent a significant step forward and already we have witnessed a relaxation of GOU interference and harassment of Muslims, the vast majority of the Uzbek population.

#### Engagement

16. (C/NF) The key to the progress we have made with the GOU is engagement. The Uzbeks are reflexively resistant to what they deem outside meddling in their society. Nevertheless, the utility or necessity of reform is not entirely lost on even the current leadership. The GOU does not want to lose face or appear to act as the result of outside pressure. Consequently, overt pressure usually produces the opposite reaction, whereas steady engagement can eventually sway even the obdurate Karimov and the paranoid members of his security apparatus. The GOU has generally responded better to offers of human rights-related assistance than threats of isolation or sanctions. We will continue to explore what types of human rights assistance, such as training and exchanges for law enforcement officials on implementing the new habeas corpus law, will most likely result in further progress on the ground.

17. (C/NF) This is a crucial fact to bear in mind as we decide

how to proceed on religious freedom, child labor, TIP and other issues with the GOU. Efforts to punish or isolate Uzbekistan will cut off dialogue, not only on these issues, but on counter-narcotics, border security, non-proliferation and other important issues on our bilateral agenda. Such an outcome would clearly limit our ability to advance our agenda with the GOU, but more importantly, it would snuff out even the pretense of a dialogue on liberalization. It also has the potential to curtail Embassy contact with Uzbek citizens, making life all the more difficult for human rights activists, people of faith and others whose causes can only be championed with international support. The ICRC shares this view and has warned us of such an outcome.

¶8. (C/NF) These views are shared by our European colleagues in Tashkent, who tell us that the EU will most likely move to ease visa restrictions against selected Uzbek officials during its next sanctions decision on October 13. We should continue to coordinate our efforts with the EU to engage the GOU on human rights, including offers of human rights-related assistance. For progress to be made, it is critical that the GOU hears a consistent message from the West. Per Ref C, the new Israeli Ambassador in Tashkent shares this approach.

#### Afghanistan

¶9. (C/NF) These decisions intersect directly with NATO and U.S. interests in establishing new supply routes for Afghanistan (Refs D and F), but they are not in opposition. The Government of Uzbekistan (GOU) is concerned about the situation in Afghanistan and needs the United States and NATO to succeed. By virtue of geography alone, Uzbekistan has a lot to fear from a resurgent Taliban and instability in Afghanistan. At the same time, Uzbekistan's geography and relatively developed infrastructure mean that it has the

potential to play a greater role as a supply route supporting U.S. and NATO forces, particularly if Turkmenistan opts out of such a role (Ref E). Currently, some sixty percent of all aviation fuel used in Afghanistan is brought in via Uzbekistan and Germany is supporting its operations in Regional Command North from Termez.

¶10. (C/NF) Uzbekistan's security interest in our success in Afghanistan, coupled with positive economic spillover a transit arrangement would bring, suggest that the GOU will be receptive to our ideas. However, this receptivity will not be decoupled from the other dimensions of our bilateral relationship. The GOU leadership may believe that an enhanced security relationship with the United States will absolve them of their commitments on human rights and other issues. We should disabuse them of this notion. Security and human rights are not and cannot be in opposition to one another in our relationship with Uzbekistan. We can advance human rights here and we can cooperate with the Uzbeks on Afghanistan. What we cannot do, however, is to isolate Uzbekistan and expect that we will continue to make progress either on human rights issues or on opening a new supply route for our forces in Afghanistan. Any decision to isolate Uzbekistan will almost certainly cut off our dialogue on human rights, religious freedom, TIP and other issues, while also potentially making a new Afghanistan supply route impossible in the process.

#### Patience

¶11. (C/NF) We are making an important difference in Uzbekistan. Our progress is incremental, uneven and frustratingly slow, but we are having an influence on the GOU's policies. The geopolitical realities of an aggressive Russia have clearly given the GOU pause and probably reinforced the position of those in the government who advocate closer ties with the U.S. This alone, however, is not going to bring about immediate accommodation on larger human rights issues. Nor could Uzbekistan withstand concerted Russian pressure if U.S.-Russian relations deteriorate to the point that Uzbekistan feels it must choose between one and the other. We need to stand firm, but being

cognizant of the limits to our influence as well, avoid taking steps that could be counterproductive. Any decision to isolate Uzbekistan will set us back across the board. We should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good in our approach to Uzbekistan.

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